

## **The Battle of Bladensburg (August 24, 1814)**

The Battle of Bladensburg was fought between the United States and Great Britain on August 24, 1814, seven miles northeast of Washington, DC, near the town of Bladensburg, in Prince George's County, Maryland. The swift routing of American troops, led by Brigadier General William H. Winder, came to be known as the "Bladensburg Races" and left the British, commanded by Major General Robert Ross, free to capture and burn Washington, DC without serious opposition.

After a series of raids against the plantations and hamlets of Chesapeake Bay, the British navy was strengthened by the fresh infusion of battle-hardened troops and ships with the temporary end of the Napoleonic Wars in June 1814. News of these increased military preparations led President James Madison to have the Tenth Military District created to encompass all strategically important areas under threat of British invasion, including Virginia north of the Rappahannock River and all of Maryland. President Madison chose General Winder, recently exchanged after being captured at the Battle of Stoney Creek (June 6, 1813), to command the district in recognition of his political connections rather than any noted military accomplishments. The combination of political appointments and the persistent belief of Secretary of War John Armstrong that the British would not attack the capitol left the area nearly undefended with the exception of a few undermanned forts and several hundred disorganized troops to cover a wide geographical area. With the retreat of the American Chesapeake Flotilla, under Captain Joshua Barney, British Rear Admiral George Cockburn decided to make the weakly defended American capitol his target and landed over 4,000 British Infantry, Marines, and sailors with accompanying artillery and Congreve Rockets, under General Ross, at Benedict, Maryland, on August 19, 1814. Through rapid recruiting, General Winder had raised over 6,000 inexperienced local militia and several artillery pieces to augment his small force of regulars to contest the British advance.

Bladensburg, Maryland, was a small village that sat astride the main routes to both Washington and Baltimore. On August 20, General Winder ordered his troops to concentrate behind the incomplete defenses erected there by local civilians to stop the British should they advance on one or the other American city. Initially the American defensive position was well-chosen along the heights overlooking the village and in command of a bridge over the East Branch of the Potomac (now the Anacostia) River that General Winder ordered burned. The bridge was not burned and the militia defending the Tenth Military District were marched and counter-marched through extreme temperatures to positions atop Lowndes's Hill and in the surrounding orchards and fields. The American position, by the morning of August 24, was not strengthened by any other preparations and was too far removed from the undestroyed bridge to defend it properly. Further complicating matters, Secretary of State James Monroe, arriving with President Madison and nearly captured with him by British sentries, moved several of Brigadier General Tobias Stanley's regiments from the orchards to exposed hillside positions within sight of the advancing British. When General Winder arrived on the field at approximately noon, he did nothing to correct the error in the defensive placement of his first of three defensive lines nor did he issue any contingency plans in case of either victory or defeat.

The battle opened at approximately one o'clock at the bridge. General Ross ordered the river crossing forced by the Eighty-Fifth Light Infantry but the initial attack was repulsed by heavy American rifle fire. As the British regrouped for a second try, General Ross ordered elements of the Forty-Fourth Regiment of Foot to ford the river and attack the American left flank. The danger to the American left was met by a counterattack, led by General Winder at the head of the Fifth Maryland Militia, resulting in a heavy exchange of volley fire before the British bombarded the Americans with Congreve Rockets. The rockets did little actual damage but caused severe demoralization among the defending American troops. General Winder's men both on the left and in front of the bridge broke and fled from the field. With little loss of time, the British continued their forward momentum but were again halted for a time by the second American line, a mile back from the river, under Brigadier General Walter Smith. When the British repeated their previous tactic of working around the American left flank, General Winder ordered a full retreat. Not having received the retreat order and with less than 500 sailors and Marines, Captain Barney, comprising the third and last line of American defense, continued the struggle. Captain Barney was severely wounded in the fighting but with his men and artillery held out in vicious hand-to-hand combat before the superior numbers of their British attackers forced them to retreat from the field. The battle ended four hours after it began with the British in complete control of the route to Washington.

With just over 250 dead and wounded, the British rested on the field of their victory while the American defenders, leaderless and without a rallying point, fled to their individual homes to care for themselves and their fewer than seventy total casualties. Leaving Washington undefended, the British resumed their march southwest and captured the American capitol in the evening of August 24, 1814. President Madison fled into the Virginia countryside and the government of the United States was briefly disrupted as a direct result of the Battle of Bladensburg. The defeat also strengthened Federalist opponents of the war and the Madison Administration, as suggested in the stinging poem "The Bladensburg Races," attacking the courage of both the army and the president that was published weeks before news of the Treaty of Ghent reached America ending the war. Though it was considered one of the worst defeats in the military history of the United States, and the nadir of the War of 1812, General Winder was found not guilty of incompetence on the field in a post-war court of inquiry headed by Major General Winfield Scott.

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**See Also:**

Anti-War Sentiment; Congreve Rockets; Chesapeake Bay, campaign of; Federalist Party; Ghent, treaty of; Madison, James; Monroe, James; Scott, Winfield; Stoney Creek, battle of; Washington, capture of.

**References:**

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